

Simmons urges White House not to weaken Clean Air Act

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WASHINGTON — Rep. Rob Simmons is joining 14 fellow Republicans and more than 120 Democrats in urging President Bush not to weaken Clean Air Act protections designed to reduce the poisonous mercury emissions spewing from power plants.

The Connecticut congressman signed a letter to Bush expressing concern that the president's proposed "Clear Skies Act" could delay reductions in mercury emissions beyond the Clean Air Act's current 2008 deadline.

Bush's bill — which underwent its first House hearing Tuesday — also would allow mercury emissions from power plants to be three times the level expected under enforcement of the current law, says the letter from 138 lawmakers.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin, which can hurt a developing fetus or young child. The Environmental Protection Agency and the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences estimate that 60,000 newborns a year may be at risk of brain damage from exposure to mercury in their mothers' wombs.

People are exposed to mercury mainly by eating fish that is conta-

minated with the toxin, which blows from the smokestacks of coal-fired power plants. In the past seven years, the number of government advisories warning people not to eat contaminated fish has more than doubled.

"Higher mercury emissions would take us a step backward in protecting and preserving our environment," Simmons said in a statement.

A spokesman for Simmons, Joe Bell, said the congressman sided with Democrats on the mercury issue because he believes the environment is not a political issue. Simmons is a member of the Sierra Club environmental group.

Last week, Gov. John G. Rowland signed into law tough new mercury emissions standards for the state's coal-fired plants. But weak laws in neighboring states can dirty Connecticut's air because "pollution can cross borders," Bell said.

Bush's bill — which sets caps on mercury and on smog and soot emissions — faces strong opposition in the Senate from Democrats and moderate Republicans. But ad-

ministration officials had hoped for an easier time in the House, where conservatives generally have more power.

The Bush Administration's plan delays any mercury reductions to 2010, and then allows 26 tons in 2010 and 15 tons through 2018. By contrast, the current rules would be effective in 2008, and could reduce power plant mercury emissions to as little as 5 tons per year, environmental groups say.

Administration officials say they believe their bill will encourage faster mercury reductions than would happen under current law because it provides economic incentives to the utility industry to cut pollution. Bush's bill creates a "cap and trade system" under which power plants that clean up their pollution can make a profit selling clean air "credits" to dirtier plants.

"What the Clear Skies Act does is take our very best tool — the cap-and-trade approach — and applies it to our most pressing air quality problem: emissions from power plants," said Jeff Holmstead, the EPA's assistant administrator for the Office of Air and Radiation.